WINNING - LOSING
Isaiah 53:1-12, Philippians 2:5-11
March 9, 1980

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One of the most important lessons in life is how to lose in a culture which will accept nothing less than victory. And one of the most difficult steps in the process of becoming a Christian is to come to terms with the Cross, in a culture that wants very little to do with it. That's not new, of course. St. Paul wrote to his Corinthian friends that the Cross of Jesus was a lot of nonsense to most people, but that God's apparent weakness is deceiving: in fact, His weakness is His strength.

In any event, we are much more comfortable with ideas like victory through strength winning at any cost. When someone asks serious questions about the reigning theology in the ranks of Big 10 athletic departments, for instance, we wink knowingly at one another and recall the pericope attributed to one of the great fathers of the faith, Leo Durocher, who reminded us that "nice guys finish last". They do, by the way, unless you are looking at things from the vantage point of Christian faith - which means a cross - in which case finishing last often means finishing first.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Let's look first at ourselves. Everybody likes to win, but we may be the most competitive people in the world. Of the 10,000 entries in the Guiness Book of World Records, fully 30% are by Americans. While thoroughly enjoying the Olympics two weeks ago many of us were inclined to forget the tremendous thrill simply of participating whenever one of our athletes failed to win the gold. Professional football coaches are the resident experts on the subject of winning - for a very good reason. If their teams don't win they lose their jobs and in that half the teams that play each week will not win, the turnover rate for coaches is extraordinarily high. No wonder, then that the late Vince Lombardi said, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." I confess to never quite understanding the precise meaning of that, but the point was, and is, clear. An even more salient descriptive statement came from George Allen, after his Washington Red Skins had lost the Super Bowl in 1973. Allen said, "Losing is like death."

We seem sometimes to fear it more than death. Or perhaps, our inability to talk about and seriously consider death results in a subtle transference. Perhaps losing is dying, and dying losing. Perhaps, as some critics contend, we regard death as a final loss, an ultimate defeat - and therefore have many problems even being rational about it. In any event, we don't like it at all. And we teach the rudiments of the theology to our children at a very young age. James Michener wrote an excellent book several years ago, Sports in America, which explores the subject. The book, by the way, will be featured in a three part television special this month. In a chapter on Sports and Children, Michener tells about investigating little league football and baseball and describes a scene many of us have witnessed. He was watching a Tiny Tot League football game: the youngsters were all under 69 pounds. After a tackle, he was startled when the mother seated beside him jumped to her feet and screamed to her eight-year old, "Way to hit, Tommy, way to hit!" The saddest thing I've ever seen in a life-long love affair with athletics was a middle-aged man spending a bright October Sunday afternoon watching two teams of ten-year olds play. He was not there because he loved the game. He was a "scout" for the team our boys would play the following Sunday. The most intensity I've experienced has been in a brief stint as little league coach, in dialogue with unhappy parents.

Michener cites Dr. Jonathan Bowen, Sociologist at California State University who did an exhaustive study of playground athletic leagues. Bowen concludes: "Parents get too caught in the win ethic...this thrust for victory and its accompanying competitiveness was far stronger among managers and coaches than players." (p.105).

I've told you about a sad moment. A happy one was seeing a nine-year old running back miss a play entirely because his eye had been caught by a bird flying by. We do, however, teach them that winning is what matters most. A local sports writer described the affection his players have for their college coach because they know "he will do anything" to win. A curious ethical position, I would submit. We lionize winners, giving trophies to twelve year tennis players, and one line on the back page of the school paper to scholars. We make millionaires out of Olympic champions, attributing to them great wisdom and insight so that their endorsement of a brand of coffee, for instance, will result in more people purchasing it. And when a winner gets religion: when an athlete, Hollywood star or successful politician writes a religious book, regardless of how innocuous, we will buy millions of copies.

Carnegie Samuel Calian, Professor of Theology at Dubuque Seminary, has written a scholarly article on the subject in which he observes that "[illegible] the ethos of our society invites, motivates and encourages us [illegible] if we are middle-class [illegible] to be winners in life." Professor Calian suggests that to be an American is to feel pressure to win at something - from 'winning souls' to self-improvement seminars our intent is to be winners - survival, we think is at stake. (See Theologizing in a Win/Lose Culture, Christian Century, 10/10/79).

The professor suggests that "the hope for success and the fear of failure are perhaps the two greatest burdens middle-class Americans carry on their shoulders."

When the intensity of our competitiveness combines with religion, the mixture can be very powerful indeed. Prayers of invocation at athletic contests are carefully neutral, of course, but they set the stage for a combination which is a fundamental distortion of both sport and faith. Prayers in the huddle may be for safety and sportsmanship but the existential hope is that divine presence will assist in victory. And the religious gesture on the field of play is simply misguided competitive intensity. My love for sports is all that keeps me from calling it what it is; namely, total blasphemy. Sport that takes on the character of a religious crusade is distorted, unhealthy, potentially destructive in its commitment to winning. It is, in fact, no longer sport at all.

Jesus of Nazareth, by anybody's standards, on the other hand, was a loser. He was not recognized by His peers for skill in His profession. He wrote no books, He accumulated no wealth, He founded no movements other than a loose relationship between twelve friends, and He certainly had no influence in the decision-making circles of His day. At the age of thirty His own neighbors in Nazareth threw Him out of town. He collected a retinue of drifters, outcasts, a few fishermen,several reformed prostitutes and a lot of poor people and went about the countrywide talking about love and infuriating the politicians and influential clergy. At thirty-three, when most people have begun seriously to make some progress; when, in this culture, we have negotiated a major mortgage, enjoyed our second significant promotion; that is, when we have first tasted the sweet flavor of winning,Jesus of Nazareth walked into the capital city of His nation and was arrested as a troublemaker. After a quick trial He was executed along with two other criminals. His few friends abandoned Him: He died alone, a failure; by anyone's standards as much of a loser as a man could be.

Scotsman John Baillie wrote, "The Christian religion would have aroused much less opposition in the world if it had left out its emphasis on sorrow and suffering and death and spoken only of life and joy and peace: if it had offered Easter and Whitsunday without Lent and Good Friday. But a religion that deliberately chooses a gallow tree for its coat of arms, what do men want with that?" (A Reasoned Faith, p.154)

What happens in a culture obsessed with winning is that we disguise the failure.



A typographical error in our bulletin several weeks ago left out of the Creed the phrase "descended into hell". Although unintentional it was an apocryphal omission. That is precisely what happens to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a culture obsessed with winning. We disguise the reality of failure. We decorate the cross so lavishly that it looks like an award given for winning a contest instead of an instrument of capital punishment. It is a very old dynamic. St. Paul wrote that the cross was foolishness to his contemporaries: a stumbling block to people of intelligence. Who wants a Lord who is a loser? Who is interested in a God who suffers? In our New Testament text this morning we heard Paul putting words around the fundamental and radical news of the Gospel: that Jesus Christ voluntarily became a loser: that He chose to empty himself of privilege and power and prerogative: and that God has exalted Him precisely because He was obedient to death.

That is hard going for us, theologically. It is hard for us, precisely because we put such a premium on winning. We prefer religion based on that premise: religion that talks about "positive thinking", "possibility thinking", religion that will be helpful and supportive, particularly in the life work of succeeding in our chosen field whether it is handball or selling real estate.

There are two reasons why the topic is an important one. Religion without the cross, first of all, will have very little to say to us when we experience the reality of losing, failing, or the inevitability of suffering. That, frankly, cuts very deeply. No one of us is immune to it. Unfortunately, we will encounter, in some form or another, disappointment and the loss of a hope or dream. Unfortunately, we will suffer, in some way or another; we will watch a loved one die, or contract an illness and hear ourselves saying those familiar words, "I never thought about this happening to me", and without a cross our religion will not be much help. The people of Israel, defeated, captured and kept in exile by the Babylonians, had to confront the loss of hope and the reality of personal suffering in a very real way. They asked the question everyone of us has asked in the middle of tragic disappointment, "Why me? Why has this happened to me?" They asked it in a particularly pointed way because they knew themselves to be special to God. They were "chosen" people. Why in the world, then, were they losing and suffering?

YES One of their prophets The prophet, whose words we read this morning, answered in a way that can be helpful to anyone who finds himself or herself in a valley of suffering. God can use human tragedy for His redemptive purposes. He can use, even the sorrow of His people, to work His will in the world.

God, we believe, does not cause human suffering. It is the oldest riddle in the history of human thought. Some people take comfort in attributing to God all the tragedies that happen - and somehow find solace in the belief that human death is God's will - regardless of the circumstances. I do not believe that God orchestrates our losses, nor does He arrange for malignancies and automobile accidents. Those things simply happen as a product of the freedom in which human life is lived. What the religion of the Cross says is that God is acquainted with grief, and that He experiences our grief with us. What the Gospel offers to you and me when disappointment is real and pain intense is a God who knows what it's all about: a God who bore in himself that most exquisite of all pain which results from watching a beloved child suffer and die. And, when there is no hope: when our failure is complete, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers a God who turned the crucifixion of His son into a victory three days later.

Salvation, after all, is knowing that all of life's defeats are bound up in the victory of Jesus Christ. [redacted] and Hans Kung, in his monumental work On Being a Christian suggests that "We experience true freedom when we are liberated from dependence on and obligation to the false gods who drive us on mercilessly to new achievements: money or career, prestige or power, or whatever else is the supreme value for us." (Op. cit.).

God does not will suffering. [redacted]. In fact, if his Fatherhood is related at all to our experience of parenting He rather enjoys our victories. He wants us to be free, however, of the bondage to winning and succeeding. We believe that His salvation in Jesus Christ is precisely to be free in this regard. God, we believe, is not defeated by what appear to be devastating losses. The death of His Son, we believe, was lovingly transformed into a victory of peace and joy.

But there is no Easter without Good Friday, and there is no life without death, and no victory without an honest confrontation with failure and defeat. Lent resolves, not in a final victory of human courage, but in human death, transformed by the love and power of God himself, into the Resurrection, the incredible Good News of Easter morning.

The Good News is that God will be with you in your suffering as well as your lighter moments. The Good News, which is essentially news about crucifixion, is that God will stand with you, with love and strength, in your time of disappointment and defeat. The Good News is that a God who has known the death of a Son, knows how grief feels, and will be with you and me in our time of sorrow.

The Good News is that He will turn losses into victories: tears into laughter; Good Friday into Easter.

That is the Gospel, to which we might well respond

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Amen.

God, our Father, as we move through these days of Lent, make us newly sensitive to Your love. Give us, O God, moments of quiet reflection, to kneel in amazement, at the Cross of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.